Mah Meri language

Mah Meri, also known as **Besisi**, **Cellate**, **Hma' Btsisi'**, **Ma' Betisek**, and **"Orang Sabat"** (pejorative term)[3], is an Austroasiatic language spoken in the Malay Peninsula. Along with Semaq Beri, Semelai and Temoq, Mah Meri belongs to the Southern Aslian branch of the Aslian languages.[1] Mah Meri is the only remaining Aslian language spoken in a coastal area (on the coasts of Negeri Sembilan and Selangor) and its speaker population is 3,675 as recorded at the Orang Asli Museum in Gombak. [1] A dictionary of the Mah Meri language has been compiled by Nicole Kruspe.[4][5]

Mah Meri	
Besisi, Betise'	
Native to	Malaysia
Region	Malay Peninsula
Ethnicity	Mah Meri
Native speakers	3,675 [1] (2008)
Language family	Austroasiatic
	■ Aslian
	■ Southern
	■ **Mah Meri**
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	mhe
Glottolog	besi1244 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/besi1244)[2]

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Phonology

Vowels [6]

Register 1 vowels

	Front	Central		Back	
				-round	+round
High	i ĩ	ɨ		ɯ ɯ̃	ũ ũ
Mid High	e ẽ	ə ə̃			o õ
Mid Low	ɛ ɛ̃				ɔ ɔ̃
Low		a ã			

Register 2 vowels

	Front	Central		Back	
				-round	+round
High	i̤			ɯ̤	ṳ
Mid High	e̤	ə̤			o̤
Mid Low	ɛ̤				ɔ̤
Low		a̤			

Voice Register[6]

There are two voice registers in Mah Meri:
Register 1: Register 1 vowels have a clear tense voice quality, shorter duration and lower pitch. Register 1 vowels also have fewer phonotactic restrictions.
Register 2: Register 2 vowels are laxer, longer and higher in pitch. Register 2 vowels also have a slight breathy voicing.

Consonants[6]

	Bilabial	Labial-velar	Denti-alveolar	Alveolar	Alveolo-palatal	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t	d			k g	ʔ
Aspirated Plosive	pʰ		tʰ				kʰ	
Nasal	m̥ m			n̥ n		ɲ̊ ɲ	ŋ̊ ŋ	
Tap				ɾ				
Fricative				s				h
Affricate					tɕ dʑ			
Aspirated Affricate					tɕʰ			
Approximant		ʍ w				j	ɥ	
Lateral Approximant				l̥ l				

Grammar

Syntax [5]

In Mah Meri, modifiers and demonstratives occur after the head as shown in examples (1) and (2) while prepositions occur before the head as shown in example (3).

(1) *du̠k*   *naleʔ*
     house   old
     'old house'

(2) *ləmɔl*   *horoʔ*   *ke*
     man   old   that
     'that old man'

(3) *haʔ*   *mbəri*
     LOC   forest
     'in the forest'

For transitive clauses, Mah Meri generally follows an Agent-Verb-Object (AVO) order as shown in example (4), but a Verb-Agent-Object (VAO) order is more common during natural discourse as shown in example (5).

(4) *hŋkiʔ*   *tomboʔ*   *ləmɔl*
     3   punch   man
     ke
     that
     'He punched that man.'

(5) *ləpas*   *ke*   *nɔŋ,*
     after   that   PST:PROX
     ʔeʔə̠t   *kədeʔ,*   *kaye*
     1SG   hide   see

hŋki ʔ	*ʔe ʔə̱t*
3.	1SG

'After that, I hid, (lest) he see me.'

For intransitive clauses in Mah Meri, both <u>Subject</u>-Verb (SV) and Verb-Subject (VS) orders are possible as shown in examples (6) and (7) respectively.

(6)   *ʔe ʔə̱t*   *nimbol*   *bawaw*
       lSG   come.from   sea

       nɔŋ
       PST:PROX

       'I came from the sea just now.'

(7)   *lɛp*   *do*   *ha ʔ*
       enter   water   LOC

       tə̱k
       ear

       'Water got into (my) ear.'

Morphology [5]

Morphology in Mah Meri is exclusively through <u>prefixation</u> and <u>infixation</u>.

Semi-productive derivations

1. *Detransitivizing N- 'DTR'*

> The prefix *n-* is attached to monosyllabic verbs and the vowel from the final syllable is reduplicated into the vowel position.
> Example: *bɛ* 'to do' → *nɛ-bɛ* 'doing, doer'
> For disyllabic verbs, the initial consonant is replaced by a <u>homorganic</u> nasal.
> Example: *plət* 'to extinguish' → *m:ələt* 'extinguishing'

2. *Transitive focus ka- 'TR'*

> The prefix *ka-* only applies to indigenous monosyllabic verbs.
> Example: *jɛt* 'to follow' → *ka-jɛt* 'to follow someone or something', *cɔʔ* 'to go' → *ka-cɔʔ* 'to go to someone or a place'

3. *Distributive < l > 'DISTR'*

> The infix *< l >* applies to disyllabic intransitive verbs of position or state and also some verbs of motion.
> The infix is inserted into the initial syllable and a schwa replaces to well to correct syllable structure.
> Example: *kancɛw* 'to be naked' → *kəlancɛw* 'many naked (people)'.
> If the penultimate syllable CV is a palatal stop plus schwa, the *< la >* infix is applied instead.
> Example: *jəkəʔ* 'to sit motionless' → *jə-la-kəʔ* 'many sitting motionless'

Regular productive derivations

1. *Iterative sɘ-RDP-root 'ITER'*

> The prefix *sɘ* is attached to the initial constituent of reduplicated bases to express iteration.
> Example: *sɘ-nake-nake* (ITER-RDP-that) 'that one over and over again'

2. *Happenstance tɘ- 'happ'*

> The prefix *tɘ-* expresses a) an inadvertent event and b) ability or inability when used in a negated clause.
> Example: *tɘ-ka-ca* 'happen to eat'

3. *Middle voice bɘ- 'MID'*

> The prefix *bɘ-* is applied to either verbal or nominal roots to express an attributive or possessive function.
> Example: bɘ-du̧k 'having a house'

Language Endangerment and Vitality

According to Ethnologue,[3] the language status of Mah Meri is '6b: Threatened', referring to the situation whereby the language is used for face-to-face communications within all generations, but is losing users. This status is based on Lewis and Smino's (2010)[7] Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS).

A study by Coluzzi, Riget & Wang (2017)[8] on language use and attitudes across 4 different Mah Meri villages on Carey Island suggests that while Mah Meri is still holds a strong and positive status in the community, there is a possibility of a complete language shift towards Malay in the future due to lesser usage of Mah Meri amongst the younger generation.

References

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8. Coluzzi, Paolo; Riget, Patricia Nora; Xiaomei, Wang (2017). "Language vitality among the Orang Asli of Malaysia: the case of the Mah Meri on Telo' Gunjeng (Carey Island, Selangor)" (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313463745). *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. **2017** (244): 137–161. doi:10.1515/ijsl-2016-0060 (https://doi.org/10.1515%2Fijsl-2016-0060).

External links

- http://projekt.ht.lu.se/rwaai RWAAI (Repository and Workspace for Austroasiatic Intangible Heritage)
- http://hdl.handle.net/10050/00-0000-0000-0003-66E2-7@view Mah Meri in RWAAI Digital Archive
- ELAR archive of Mah Meri (and Ceq Wong) language documentation materials (http://elar.soas.ac.uk/deposit/0208)